

'Kuzneski's writing has raw power'
JAMES PATTERSON

SWØRD OF GØD

CHRIS KUZNESKI

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
SIGN OF THE CROSS



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Sword of God
by
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I

Saturday, 23 December
Jeju Island, South Korea
(60 miles south of the Korean Peninsula)

The boy could smell the blood from fifty yards away. It was a strong, pungent odour that made him gag yet piqued his curiosity. Common sense told him to turn around and get some help. His father. His mother. One of his neighbours. Anyone who could protect him from what he was about to discover. But common sense rarely mattered to an eight-year-old.

Especially when he was somewhere he didn't belong.

The valley to his right was lined with camphor trees, many seventy-five feet tall and a hundred feet wide. The path in front of him was rugged, made of black volcanic rock that dominated the subtropical island and formed its very core. The temperature was cold, in the low forties, but would climb steadily as the day wore on, a by-product of the nearby Kuroshio and Tsushima currents. The sun was still rising over the eastern sea when he made his choice. He zipped

his jacket over his nose and inched forward, following the stench of death.

For years his family had warned him about this place, claiming it was built for evil. It was a story that wasn't difficult to believe. Sometimes, late at night, he could hear the screams – bloodcurdling shrieks that ripped through the hillside and jostled him from his sleep. The first time he heard them he assumed he was having a nightmare, but the sounds didn't stop when he sat up in bed. In fact, they got louder. This went on for days, weeks, until he could take no more.

He had to know the truth.

Ignoring his family's wishes, he sneaked into town and asked one of the village elders about the sounds from the hill. The old man laughed at the boy's audacity. He, too, had been a curious child and felt this trait should be rewarded – but only if the boy could understand the truth.

'Look at me,' the old man ordered in Korean. 'Let me see your eyes.'

The boy knew he was being tested. He stared at the old man, refusing to blink, hoping to prove his courage even though his palms were sweating and his knees were trembling.

Tension filled the hut for several seconds. The entire time the boy could barely breathe.

Finally, the old man nodded. The boy was ready for the truth, if for no other reason than to keep

him afraid of the place on the hill, to keep him alive. Sometimes fear was a blessing.

With a grave face and a gravelly voice, the old man whispered a single name that was known throughout Jeju, a place that sent shivers down the boy's spine and woke the hairs on his neck.

Pe-Ui Je Dan.

The boy gasped at its mention. The place was so infamous, so ominous, that other details weren't necessary. He had heard the stories, just like everyone else on the island. Yet until that moment he had thought they were just a myth, an urban legend that had made it across the Sea of Japan for the sake of scaring children into doing their chores. But the old man assured him that wasn't the case. Not only was it real, it was close. Just up the path.

At that moment, the boy promised that he'd never venture up there. And he meant it, too. It was a vow he intended to keep. Not only for his safety, but also for the safety of his village.

Unfortunately, all of that changed on the morning he smelled the blood.

As strange as it seemed, there was something about the scent that attracted him. Something magnetic. Animalistic. One minute he was walking to the store, the next he was tracking the scent like a wolf. Crunching up the rocky path, looking for its source as if nothing else mattered. Sadly, this happened all the time in the world of children –

courage and curiosity taking them places where they didn't belong – yet rarely did it lead them into so much danger.

The boy didn't know it as he trudged up the hill, but he was about to kill his village.

*Thursday, 28 December
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

The Payne Industries Building sat atop Mount Washington, high above the city of Pittsburgh. It was a vantage point that showcased one of the best skylines in the country. From his office, Jonathon Payne could see the confluence of three rivers (the Monongahela and Allegheny flowing together to form the Ohio), two pro sports stadiums (PNC Park and Heinz Field), and a Second World War submarine (the USS *Requin*).

Yet on this day, the thing that captured his attention was the helicopter.

He heard it roar down the river valley, nearly brushing the Gateway Clipper and the top of the Smithfield Street Bridge. It soared over the twinkling lights of Station Square and flew parallel to the 635-foot track of the Monongahela Incline, a landmark built in 1870. The old-fashioned cable car chugged up the hill at six miles per hour, a slow pace compared to the chopper, which banked sharply and aimed right towards Payne's building.

The glass and steel structure had been built by his grandfather, a self-made millionaire who went from mill worker to mill owner in less than thirty years. Payne revered the man, yet bypassed the family business for a career in the military. There he'd led a Special Forces unit called the MANIACs, an elite counter-insurgency team comprised of the top soldiers that the Marines, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard could find. Whether it was personnel recovery, unconventional warfare, or counter-guerrilla sabotage, the MANIACs were the best of the best.

Payne reflected on those days as he listened to the roar of the chopper while it hovered outside his window. It transported him to another time and place, back when he carried a gun for protection and a knife for fun. When he risked his life and killed for his country without giving it a second thought. Back before his grandfather died and left him a corporation to run. That was the main reason he had left the military – to honour his grandfather's dying wish.

The shrill of the desk phone cut Payne's memories short. Annoyed, he let it ring a few more times before he answered, finally turning to face the window to see who was calling. He stared at the chopper, eye to eye, more than a thousand feet above the city. The only thing separating them was three inches of bullet-proof glass and Payne's reluctance to get back in the game.

'This is Payne.'

‘This is Colonel Harrington. Sorry to drop in like this, but we’ve got a situation.’

Payne had heard those words hundreds of times before, and it always meant trouble. Once in his lifetime, he wanted to hear the term *situation* followed by a dose of good news.

‘Colonel, I’m guessing you didn’t get my memo, but I’m retired.’

Harrington growled. ‘I’m guessing you didn’t get *my* memo. I don’t give a fuck.’

The chopper landed on the building’s helipad, where it was greeted by four armed security guards who questioned the pilot and searched the aircraft before escorting the colonel inside. Unarmed, he wore the clothes of a civilian – khaki trousers, white dress shirt, black overcoat – an outfit that would have blended in with the business world, if not for his dramatic arrival. Normally Payne’s visitors parked in the garage under the building instead of on the roof.

Then again, his entrance wasn’t the only thing that stood out. There was something about Harrington, a quality that one noticed but couldn’t put a finger on. Maybe it was his board-straight posture or his striking white hair, shorn tight on the sides. Whatever it was, he had a presence. An air. One felt it when he walked into a room. The man commanded attention.

Payne waited for him in the conference room, a

chestnut-lined chamber equipped with the latest audio-visual gadgets – computers, plasma screens, high-speed connections. Plus it was windowless, which was the best safeguard against laser-guided listening devices. Or getting *lased*, as the military called it. A single video camera, mounted in the far corner, tracked Harrington as he strode towards Payne, who stood at the head of the conference table.

Instead of saluting, Harrington simply nodded. ‘Colonel Joshua Harrington, US Army.’

Payne looked him straight in the eye. ‘Jonathon Payne, US Navy. Retired.’

‘Yes, Payne, you’ve made that quite clear. Still, I think you’ll want to hear me out on this.’

‘Oh, yeah? Why’s that?’

‘Because it involves you.’

Payne was not surprised. ‘That’s a shocker.’

Harrington sneered and sat in one of the leather chairs. He waited there, poker-faced, until Payne took a seat as well. ‘This also involves that buddy of yours, David Jones. Is he here?’

Payne nodded. ‘Yeah, I think he’s still around. Do you want me to get him?’

‘No need. I’ll get him myself.’ Harrington pointed towards the video camera in the corner of the ceiling, then pointed to the chair next to Payne. ‘Don’t worry. He’ll be here shortly.’

Payne grinned, duly impressed. The colonel had been in the room less than thirty seconds yet had properly assessed the situation. Jones was watching

them from an adjacent room, running a background check on Harrington while Payne handled the small talk. The fact that the colonel was able to sort things out so quickly said a lot about the man. Somehow it proved his worth.

So did the credentials that appeared on Jones's computer screen. Harrington was a graduate of West Point and had earned his silver eagle the old-fashioned way: by going to war and being a hero. In fact, the more Jones read, the more surprised he was that he'd never met him before. His résumé read like a Tom Clancy novel. Only 600 pages shorter.

A moment later, Jones entered the room with the look of a busted schoolboy, a combination of shame and embarrassment that would have been much more apparent if his flushed cheeks showed through his black skin. He was tempted to offer an apology but realized it wasn't necessary. He was simply running security on an officer he had never met. It was protocol.

'So, did I check out? Did I pass your little test?' Harrington pulled his bifocals from the inner pocket of his overcoat and slipped them on. 'Or do you want my fingerprints, too?'

Jones was tempted to flip him off and say, *Yeab, let's start with the middle finger.*

But Payne didn't give him a chance. 'So, Colonel, what can we help you with?'

'Who said anything about *helping* me? Do I look like I need your help?'

Payne and Jones exchanged glances. They were confused by Harrington's tone.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' Payne said, 'but you just buzzed my building with your chopper and demanded to speak with me ASAP. My guess is you're either here for help or you're out delivering Christmas cookies. And if that's the case, you're three days late.'

Jones stared at Harrington. 'You have cookies? Do you have any with green sprinkles?'

The colonel ignored their banter – he had been warned about Payne and Jones's antics – and flipped through his folder instead. It was filled with maps, photographs, and reports. All of them stamped CLASSIFIED in red letters. 'Gentlemen, let me be blunt. I don't want to be here, talking to non-army personnel. I think it's a total waste of time, both mine and yours. However, the Pentagon felt you might offer something to my investigation, although I can't figure out what.' With a disapproving eye, he glanced around the room. 'It's obvious you've gone soft.'

'Soft?' Payne echoed.

'Yes, *soft*. You and your fancy-ass leather chairs and your Radio Shack surveillance equipment. How long have you been out of the service? Four years? The entire infrastructure of the military has changed in that time. How in the hell can you possibly help me?'

Somehow Payne managed to keep a straight face. He pondered things for a moment, trying to read between the lines of the colonel's rant. No one in

his right mind would show up with this much attitude unless he was trying to pick a fight. And the only purpose that would serve is if Harrington wanted to end this conversation before it got started. And that didn't make sense. If Harrington wanted to have a fifteen-second chat, he could've done that by phone. The fact that he flew here from Washington meant something else was going on. Something less obvious.

Suddenly, Payne figured it out. At least he hoped he had.

'Colonel, I have to admit I was *this* close to throwing you out of my fancy-ass chair. Then it dawned on me, there's no way the Pentagon would've sent a total prick like you without giving me some kind of warning. Therefore, I'm going to assume that you're acting like an ass in order to test us, maybe trying to see if we've lost any discipline during the past few years. If that's the case, I gotta commend you. Because you've got that asshole thing down pat.'

Payne hoped he had guessed right, but if not, so what? He was retired and had enough money to live on for the rest of his life. What did it matter if he told off some jackass from DC?

Still, the room grew uncomfortable while Payne waited for a reaction.

Finally, he got the one he was hoping for: Colonel Harrington broke into a smile.

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‘Forgive my rudeness,’ Harrington explained, ‘but I had to know what I was dealing with. There’s no way I was going to entrust you with this information if I didn’t think you could handle some heat. Because, trust me, there’s going to be some major heat on this one.’

‘What kind?’ Jones asked.

‘International, domestic, political. We’ve got the potential for a world-class shitstorm, and right now we’re missing our weatherman.’

Payne deciphered the statement. ‘Does this weatherman have a name?’

‘One you’re familiar with: Captain Trevor Schmidt. I believe you trained him with the MANIACs.’

Payne and Jones both nodded. They had run the unit for several years, and Schmidt was one of their favourites. A black-haired kid from Columbus, Ohio, who had a passion for war and a taste for revenge. Then again, that could have described anyone in the MANIACs. They were a special group with a unique assignment. Do anything necessary, but don’t get caught.

‘When was Schmidt last seen?’ Jones asked.

‘We aren’t really sure.’

‘How about where?’

‘We don’t know that, either.’

‘Okay, Colonel, let’s approach this from a different angle. What *do* you know?’

Harrington shrugged. ‘We know that he’s missing.

Him and his entire squad. Gone, like fucking ghosts.’

Payne grimaced. ‘I don’t believe in ghosts.’

‘Neither did I. At least not until recently. Now I’m not so sure.’

Somehow the Department of Defense had managed to lose an entire squad, which was pretty tough to do with modern Combat Survivor/Evader Locator (CSEL) radios, technology that provided precise geolocation and navigation data to rescue parties. That meant Schmidt was running a classified black op, a covert operation that the Pentagon didn’t want anyone – not even Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) – to know about.

‘Tell me, how black was the mission?’

‘Black as you can get,’ Harrington answered. ‘And it’s my job to keep it that way.’

‘If that’s the case, why bring us into it? Why go out of house?’

‘Is it because *I*’m black?’ Jones asked.

Harrington ignored him. ‘The reality is you trained Schmidt so you might be able to give us some insight into the way he thinks – where he’ll go, what he’ll do, who he’ll rely on. The truth is you MANIACs are an interesting breed, one with a unique sense of warfare that no one fully understands but yourselves. Furthermore, two generals and an admiral assured me I’d be a fool if I didn’t use you as a resource.’

‘Just a resource? Nothing more than that?’

‘Actually, I’d welcome you aboard in any capacity. Whether that’s here or in the field.’

Payne glanced at Jones, who was nodding eagerly. That wasn’t a surprise, because Jones was always up for another mission. Upon his retirement from the military, he became a private detective, setting up shop in Payne’s office building, a way for the best friends to grab lunch whenever possible. Unfortunately, the life of a Pittsburgh PI was not nearly as glamorous as Jones had imagined, especially compared to the missions he had run for the MANIACs. How could taking pictures of cheating spouses ever compare with killing terrorists or blowing up bridges?

Payne, on the other hand, was more reluctant. He wasn’t fully comfortable in the corporate world, opting to donate most of his time to local charities instead of living at the office the way his grandfather had. But that didn’t mean Payne was willing to risk it all. If he was killed without an heir, he knew Payne Industries would be dismantled, piece by piece, and sold to the highest bidder. And that was something he couldn’t let happen. He loved his grandfather way too much to dishonour his life’s work by doing something reckless.

Still, Payne felt a similar obligation to his military career, an unwavering devotion to his country and the men he had trained. If one of them was in trouble, he knew it was his duty to help – whether that was as a behind-the-scenes resource or as an expert in the field. Hell, he couldn’t live with himself if he

opted to sit on the sidelines while one of his men needed him. In his mind, that would be far more irresponsible than risking his own life to help.

‘Okay, Colonel. We’re willing to lend you a hand. What do you need us to do?’

‘I need you to come with me. We’ll have plenty of time to talk en route.’

‘En route?’ Jones asked. ‘To where?’

Harrington stood from his chair. ‘Korea.’

Payne winced. He wasn’t expecting such a long trip. ‘North or South?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘Of course it matters. I need to know how much ammo to pack.’

Harrington smiled an all-knowing smile. ‘Don’t worry, Payne. Packing *won’t* be an issue. I already sent some men to your homes. Your clothes are waiting at the airport.’